

FY 2020-21 BUDGET QUESTION

Response to Request for Information

DEPARTMENT(S): Austin Police

REQUEST NO.: 110

REQUESTED BY: Pool

DATE REQUESTED: 8/3/20

DATE POSTED: 8/5/20

REQUEST: Regarding the License Plate Reader system:

- Please describe the general purpose of the License Plate Reader system for a patrol unit, and the purpose to which is it most frequently applied.
- Please describe how information gathered by the License Plate Reader system is shared across law enforcement or other entities.
- What is the success rate for the License Plate Reader system on Amber Alert and Silver Alert events?

RESPONSE:

Patrol currently has nine marked vehicles that are equipped with the LPR system (three attached cameras mounted to the front and back of a patrol unit to capture license plates). The vehicles are spread out amongst the four different patrol stations (HQ, North Sub, East Sub, and South Sub) to ensure citywide coverage. Patrol primarily uses these units to scan vehicle license plates for stolen vehicles and stolen license plates. Patrol officers also can assist investigative units using the LPR system. For example: a “Stop and Identify” BOLO can be created on a vehicle, and when scanned by patrol officers, the system alerts the officers that the vehicle is part of an on-going investigation and detectives are seeking information on the operator of the vehicle. The LPR system allows suspects in criminal cases to be located outside of an investigative unit’s normal workday. The LPR system was used extensively with positive results during the Austin bomber investigation and the I-35 rock throwing case. The LPR system also has the ability to locate sex offenders and individuals who are the subject of an Amber or Silver Alert.

Data is gathered for the LPR (LEARN) system using two methods. All law enforcement scans are uploaded into the database. The company also uses scanners affixed to civilian vehicles such as tow trucks and taxi cabs to capture license plate scans. These scanners upload license plate scans, but civilians who capture the data cannot see the information being scanned and uploaded into the Vigilant Solutions LEARN portal. This is referred to as commercial data. All law enforcement agencies that subscribe to this service can go online and access any license plates scanned into the database by other law enforcement agencies after an MOU between the two agencies has been approved. Law enforcement agencies also have the ability to purchase Vigilant Solutions’ commercial data for a yearly fee. This allows an agency to view both law enforcement and commercial scans in the database. Vigilant Solutions is a nationwide system which allows some investigations to be pursued anywhere within the continental United States. The commercial data has proven invaluable with recovering stolen vehicles, locating and apprehending violent suspects, and furthering other criminal investigations.

In regard to the success rates on LPR systems on Amber and Silver alerts, this information is hard to capture. Neither Vigilant Solutions (creator of the LPR software) or Texas DPS capture this information. At APD, we do not track our Silver Alerts, although the new crime analyst in Cold Case/Missing Persons plans on doing so moving forward. Our last Amber Alert was in December. A review of information in this case showed that the LPR system did not lead to the child being located in Houston, as other investigative leads were utilized.